

Michael Rietmulder, *Minnesota Daily* (University of Minnesota)

Not all earmarks are tainted - U campuses have received many of them since 2008. A stronger Republican presence in the U.S. House and Senate could bring about the death of a longstanding congressional practice.

For better or for worse, earmarks have been a staple on Capitol Hill for decades. But the Republicans' small-government agenda is threatening to disrupt business as usual in Washington.

Arrays of special interests, members' pet projects and public institutions have reaped the benefits of this so-called pork barrel spending - including the University of Minnesota.

The Senate Republican caucus recently voted to impose an earmark moratorium. House Republicans, who enacted a similar ban in March, renewed their anti-earmark pledge Thursday.

But as Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell acknowledged in a speech last Monday announcing his support for the ban, prohibiting earmarks is a double-edged sword.

"Make no mistake, I know the good that has come from the projects that I've helped support throughout my state," McConnell said. "But there is simply no doubt that the abuse of this practice has caused Americans to view it as a symbol of the waste and out-of-control spending that every Republican in Washington is determined to fight."

According to Taxpayers for Common Sense, University of Minnesota campuses across the state have taken in more than \$5.37 million in bacon-flavored dough since 2008. It's a drop in the bucket for the University's budget, but every little bit helps, especially with reduced state funding and the ever-increasing cost of tuition.

Some members of Minnesota's congressional delegation have been friendlier to the University with their earmarks than others.

Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., has been the University's highest earmark contributor. In 2010 alone, Klobuchar helped to steer \$2.35 million to campuses statewide, including \$1.6 million for hypersonic research at the Twin Cities campus.

In 2009, she sponsored or co-sponsored more than half a million earmark dollars for the Twin Cities campus, including \$238,000 to the University's School of Public Health for a digital X-ray machine.

According to the Center for Responsive Politics, Klobuchar has been Minnesota's highest grossing member, accumulating nearly \$414 million worth of earmarks since 2008. Still, she's a far cry from being an earmark-aholic. The \$79 million Klobuchar tallied in 2010 placed her in the bottom half of the Senate in total pork spending.

Not all of Minnesota's members have been actively oinking for the University.

Rep. Keith Ellison of Minneapolis has not been a pro-University porker. Of the \$128 million in earmarks Ellison has notched since 2008, not a cent has gone to the University. This is not to say, however, that Ellison hasn't been championing some worthy causes via earmarks.

This year, Ellison had a hand in securing \$6 million for Reach Out and Read, a national nonprofit which aims to improve early childhood learning by partnering with pediatricians to promote reading. During his two terms in office, the sophomore Democrat has funneled millions of dollars to Minnesota's Fifth Congressional District for a host of transportation projects, public safety improvements and community development groups.

Nevertheless Congressman Ellison: Gophers like bacon, too.

Despite the stigma earmarks carry, the truth is they only account for approximately 1 percent of federal spending. Not all projects are as ineffectual as Alaska's infamous Bridge to Nowhere.

Take Rep. Betty McCollum's procurement of \$450,000 for Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota. The St. Paul-based nonprofit offers a menu of services for older adults, people with disabilities and an outreach program for homeless youth. It's hard to argue that programs like these don't provide community benefits worthy of federal cash.

Unfortunately, the more egregious earmarks like the GOP-dubbed "Cornhusker Kickback" grab headlines and stir public disdain.

During intense negotiations on the health care bill, Nebraska Sen. Ben Nelson vowed to block the bill until Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid wove in special Medicaid funding for Nelson's home state. The deal was reportedly to the tune of \$100 million. Thankfully, it was ultimately quashed after public backlash.

Back-room brokering fuels government mistrust and provides ammunition for smaller government advocates like the Tea Partiers.

Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, leader of the House Tea Party Caucus, has advocated for stipulating earmarks only be used for transportation projects.

For members looking to have their cake and eat it too, an outright ban is not necessary. Why not just give earmarks a makeover? Instituting a rule and a subsequent ad campaign that earmarks should only be used for veterans' service - Freedommarks - is a Tea Party solution. The staunchest small government trumpeters could boast of doling out millions of dollars worth of Freedommarks.

Jokes aside, any earmark ban should be viewed as more of a symbolic gesture, not a radical spending reform, as it would do little to actually curb spending.

If Americans need an earmark moratorium to regain some level of trust in their much-damaged relationship with elected officials, so be it.

